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Around the Americas

U.S.-Mexico ties go from bad to worse

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WASHINGTON — U.S.-Mexican relations have gone from delicate to disastrous in the wake of a U.S. narcotics agent's kidnapping and a traffic-choking border spat. U.S. and Mexican officials say.

The officials noted that although car-trunk searches by U.S. officials along the 1,760-mile border have ended, the latest flap has heightened tensions seething since the arrival of the Reagan administration.

These include disagreements over Central American policy, U.S. concerns about safety of Americans traveling in Mexico and the claim by some Mexican officials that the United States is meddling in internal Mexican affairs by funneling money to a conservative opposition party.

DEA chief's charges

U.S. frustrations received further airing over the weekend when outgoing Drug Enforcement Administration chief Francis Mullen accused Mexican police of allowing a key suspect in the Feb. 7 kidnapping of DEA agent Enrique Camarena to escape.

A Mexican diplomat based in Washington noted that the Camarena kidnap and the border episode have further "exacerbated the already deteriorated relations between our two governments." He said relations have fallen to their lowest level in years.

The U.S. decision Feb. 15 to tighten border security and search cars brought the third Mexican diplomatic protest since Reagan assumed office in 1981. Washington also took the unusual step of summoning home its ambassador to Mexico, John Gavin, to convey U.S. displeasure over the level of Mexican cooperation in the Camarena affair.

U.S. officials said privately that one reason Gavin came to Washington was because the administration was considering further action against Mexico, including a possible travel advisory that would warn U.S. tourists not to visit Mexico.

Last year, four Americans were killed, and 627 violent crimes were recorded against U.S. tourists in Mexico. Since December, seven Americans, including Camarena, have disappeared.

Mullen angered

U.S. officials said the administration decided to back down on the Camarena case and ease the border searches after four tension-filled meetings here involving Secretary of State George Shultz and national security adviser Robert McFarlane.

Administration officials said President Reagan and Mexican President Miguel de la Madrid had

a "cordial" phone conversation, plans for the travel advisory were dropped and Gavin returned to his post — all to signal a desire to return to business as usual.

The officials said downgrading the "crisis" angered Mullen and led to his remarks in a televised interview that Mexican police had impeded the Camarena search.

The State Department Monday minimized the Mullen interview, saying his concerns about "possible lower-level official malfeasance" had already been raised with senior Mexican officials.

In addition to the fear of further damaging diplomatic relations and fueling Mexico's traditional anti-Americanism, U.S. officials say they are concerned that a bilateral crisis could shift attention from the administration's efforts to

persuade Congress to restore aid to Nicaragua's rebels.

They also want to lessen tensions at a time when the conservative National Action Party (PAN) has a good chance of beating the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in July elections in north Mexico.

Both countries looked for improvement in their traditionally touchy relations when de la Ma-

drid was inaugurated in 1982; he was seen here as more conservative than his predecessor, Jose Lopez Portillo.

Beginning last year, however, relations have steadily declined, mostly as a result of Mexico's opposition to Reagan's policies in Central America.

Early in 1984, hard-liners in the Reagan administration reportedly proposed economic sanctions against Mexico to force de la Madrid to end aid to Nicaragua.

This option was abandoned. But U.S. officials said Reagan did sign a secret National Security Decision Document authorizing U.S. efforts to reduce Mexico's "material and diplomatic support for ... Communist guerrillas and its economic and diplomatic support for the Nicaraguan government."

Then, on Feb. 23, 1984, Gen. Paul Gorman, commander of U.S. forces in Central America, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that Mexico had become a "center for subversion" for Central America and had the region's most "corrupt government and society."

Finally, CIA Director William Casey instructed John Horton, then the agency's top intelligence officer for Latin America, to

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prepare an "estimate" on the potential of the Central American crisis to destabilize Mexico.

CIA analyst quits

Horton's estimate reportedly discounted the possibility, and Casey sent back the document for revision nine times, finally prompting Horton to resign, U.S. officials said.

On the domestic political front, some Mexican officials accused Ambassador Gavin of consorting with the PAN in an apparent effort to turn it into a viable political alternative to the PRI. Gavin has denied any wrongdoing, but some U.S. officials have indicated the United States would welcome PAN election victories.

As a result, the Mexican government has begun to suspect a conspiracy between the United States and PAN. In December, a top Mexican official told Mexican reporters in Washington that "we suspect the United States may be funneling money to the PAN."

A Mexican diplomat repeated the same charge last week during the border crisis. But a PAN spokesman dismissed the claim as consistent with PRI's "desperation about possible PAN triumphs."